

The Trojan War



BACKGROUND:

Around 1250 BCE, the Mycenaeans banded together under the leadership of the king of Mycenae to attack Troy, a rival commercial power. From your study of the geography of ancient Greece, you can see that Troy controlled trade routes between the Aegean and black seas. After a long and devastating war, the Mycenaeans emerged the victors.

Scholars first learned about the Trojan War from the *Iliad* (IH-lee-uhd) and the *Odyssey* (Ah-d-uh-see), two of the best-known epic poems in the world. The poems were probably composed by Homer, a blind Greek poet, about 750 BCE, long after the fall of Troy. Homer based his poems on stories that had been passed on by earlier generations.

According to the *Iliad*, the tragic struggle occurred because Paris, a Trojan prince, kidnapped Helen, wife of the king of Sparta. The Spartan king and his brother, King Agamemnon (ag-uh-MEHM-nahn) of Mycenae, enlisted the help of other rulers and eventually involved all of Greece in the effort to rescue Helen. After ten years of war, the Achaeans destroyed Troy and drove the Trojans into exile. In the *Odyssey*, Homer described the wandering and adventures of the Mycenaean warrior Odysseus (oh-DIH-see-uhs) after the fall of Troy.

Until the late 1800s, historians considered the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to be fiction. The poems, which mixed stories of gods and goddesses with legends of human heroes, seemed to have no historical value. However, Heinrich Schliemann (SHLEE-muhn), an amateur archaeologist, believed otherwise. He thought Troy had really existed, and he set out to prove it.

Schliemann began to excavate a site in northwestern Asia Minor that matched Homer's description of Troy. Digging revealed the ruins of an ancient city, but Schliemann soon discovered that at least nine cities had been built at different times on the same spot. (In ancient times, as today, people often rebuilt a city that had been destroyed by war or natural disaster. The new city would be built on the ruins of the old city). Finally, the charred wood and destruction found on one level suggested that this was the city actually destroyed by the Mycenaeans. Later, Schliemann excavated the site of Mycenae, which was also described by Homer.

FROM THE *ILIAD*: [Hector's wife begs him not to fight Achilles]

O Hector, your courage will be your destruction; and you have no pity on your little son or on me, who will soon be your widow . . . if I lose you, it would be better for me to die . . .

Then tall Hector . . . answered: "Wife, I too have thought upon all this. But I would feel deep shame if like a coward, I stayed away from battle. All my life I have learned to be brave and to fight always in the front ranks of the Trojans, winning glory for myself . . .

In ancient Greece, professional storytellers, or bards, sang Homer's Iliad and Odyssey to attentive audiences. From an early age, children heard the thrilling tales of gods and goddesses. Citizens quoted passages from the epics to support their views. In addition, Greek poets and artists were inspired by Homer.

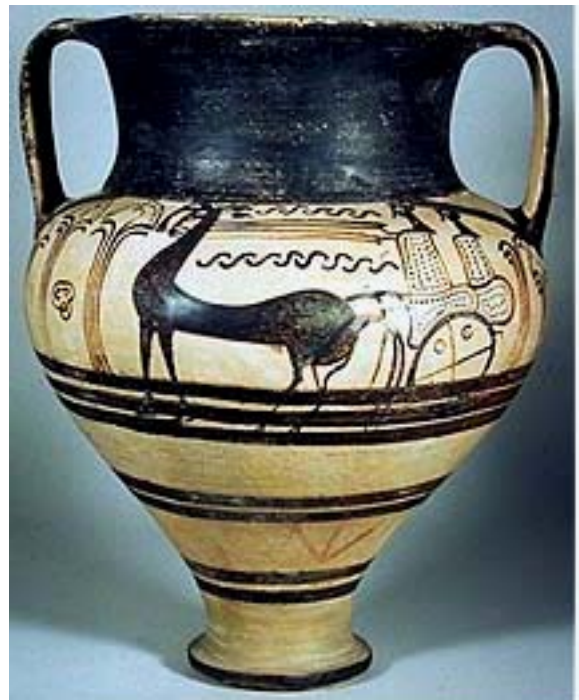
The story of the Trojan horse, which follows, was told in the Odyssey by a blind poet, who might have been modeled on Homer, himself a blind poet.

FROM THE *ODYSSEY*:

The bard inspired of heaven took up the story at the point where some of the Greek warriors from Argos set fire to their tents and sailed away while others, hidden within the horse, were waiting with Odysseus in the Trojan place of assembly. For the Trojans themselves had drawn the horse into their fortress, and it stood there while they sat in council around it, and were in three minds as to what they should do. Some were for breaking it up then and there; others would have it dragged to the top of the rock on which the fortress stood, and then thrown down the precipice {sharp cliff}; while yet others were for letting it remain as an offering . . . for the gods. And this last way was how they settled it . . .

But the city was doomed when it took in that horse, within which were all the bravest of the Argives waiting to bring death and destruction on the Trojans.

Then Demodocus sang how the sons of the Achaeans {Mycenaeans} issued from the horse, and sacked the town, breaking out from their ambush. He sang how they overran the city hither and thither {here and there} and ravaged it, and how Odysseus went raging like Ares [the god of war] . . . to the house of Deiphobus. It was there that the fight raged most furiously; nevertheless by Athena's help he was victorious.



QUESTIONS:

1. How does Hector's response to his wife give us insight into the Greek heroic ideal of *arête*, meaning virtue and excellence?
2. Name the three ways of handling the horse that the Trojans considered.
3. What does the story reveal about ancient Greek culture?